

Bonaventurian Resonances in Benedict XVI's Theology of Revelation

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OF THE RECENT evaluations of Pope Benedict XVI's theology, few have examined at any length the influence of St. Bonaventure on his thought. There are a number of surveys or brief descriptions of his encounter with Bonaventure as Benedict wrote his habilitation, but what analysis of Bonaventure's influence that does exist tends to focus on Benedict's ecclesiology or his interest in history and eschatology.¹ These emphases are no doubt justified, since these themes arise throughout Benedict's career, but they fail to capture one of his primary interests during his early career, namely revelation. History, eschatology, and the Church are, of course, bound up with the concept of revelation, but

¹ See, for example, John L. Allen, Jr., *Pope Benedict XVI: A Biography of Joseph Ratzinger* (New York-London: Continuum, 2000), 36–38, 99–100; Andrea Bellandi, *Fede cristiana come "Stare e comprendere."* *La giustificazione dei fondamenti della fede in Joseph Ratzinger* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1996), 90–92; Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger–Kirchliche Existenz und existentielle Theologie unter dem Anspruch von "Lumen Gentium."* *Ekklesiologische Grundlinien* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004), 149–52; Dorothee Kaes, *Theologie im Anspruch von Geschichte und Wahrheit. Zur Hermeneutik Joseph Ratzingers* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1997), 62–63; Paolo Martuccelli, *Origine e natura della chiesa. La prospettiva storico-donnativa di Joseph Ratzinger* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 305–20, 330–33; Aidan Nichols, *The Thought of Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger: An Introductory Study* (New York/London: Burns and Oates, 2005), 51–65; Andrea Tornielli, *Ratzinger. Custode della fede* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2002), 36–39; and Thomas Weiler, *Die Ekklesiologie Joseph Ratzingers und ihr Einfluss auf das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1997), 125. There are some exceptions to this trend in the studies by A. Bellandi and D. Kaes.

Benedict's theology of revelation is the larger conceptual sphere in which his ecclesiology, theology of history, and eschatology develop. Revelation was also among his first theological interests, and the theology of revelation that he articulated was also among the first elements of his overall theological project that took a definite shape. In the formation of this theology, Bonaventure played a significant role. It was Bonaventure's theology of revelation that initially interested the young Joseph Ratzinger as he began research for his habilitation. Although Benedict was forced to omit his study of Bonaventure's theology of revelation from the final draft of his habilitation, as he recounts in his memoirs, he claimed that what he learned from Bonaventure regarding revelation was "very important for me at the time of the conciliar discussion on revelation, Scripture, and tradition."² This interest in Bonaventure's theology of revelation is the background for Ratzinger's published studies on Bonaventure's ecclesiology and theology of history.

It is also important to note that however much Bonaventure's theology of revelation and his salvation-historical mode of theology appealed to Benedict, the latter's appraisal of Bonaventure's ecclesiology was not entirely positive, nor was his evaluation of Bonaventure's theology of history and eschatology entirely free from criticism. Nevertheless, there are significant connections between the two men on these topics. This essay will describe several aspects of Bonaventure's theology of revelation and attempt to show parallels between Bonaventure's and Benedict XVI's understanding of revelation and history and its significance for the Church.

Aspects of Bonaventure's Theology of Revelation

Although Joseph Ratzinger was clearly influenced by Thomas Aquinas's understanding of revelation,³ Bonaventure's articulation of this teaching, especially in the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, was particularly important for

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927–1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 109.

³ For Ratzinger's interpretation of Thomas on revelation and salvation history, see his *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 178–79; and idem, *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: The Church as Communion*, ed. Stephan Otto Horn and Vinzenz Pfnür, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 21–28. See also Leo Scheffczyk, "Der neuscholastische Traktat *De revelatione divina*, die dogmatische Konstitution *Dei Verbum* und die Lehre des hl. Thomas," in *La doctrine de la révélation divine de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, ed. Léon Elders (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), 13–26; and Leo Elders, "Aquinas on Holy Scripture as the Medium of Divine Revelation," in Elders, *La doctrine de la révélation divine*, 132–52.

Benedict.⁴ In the works of Bonaventure, Benedict found that the Franciscan master never treated the concept of revelation in a systematic way, in the manner of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century neo-scholasticism. Bonaventure's interest, rather, lay primarily in "the many individual revelations which have taken place in the course of history."⁵ Bonaventure's writings address "the individual acts of revelation which can be repeated, and which in fact are often repeated by God. In these acts, God turns toward the individual recipient of the revelation."⁶ This emphasis on a dynamic model of revelation necessarily touches on how revelation is perceived in faith and in Scripture and how humans respond to God in salvation history.

In the *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, Benedict discovered that Bonaventure's understanding of revelation had three primary significations. The first signification consists of an unveiling of the future.⁷ When Bonaventure uses "revelation" in this sense, it usually refers to Old Testament figures and events representing Christ in some way. The second signification consists of

⁴ Joseph Komonchak has rightly noted Benedict's initial interest in Bonaventure, although his characterization of Bonaventure as "anti-philosophical" and "anti-intellectual" requires significant qualification at the least, if not outright rejection. See his "The Church in Crisis, Pope Benedict's Theological Vision," *Commonweal* 132 (June 3, 2005). For more nuanced appraisals of Bonaventure's philosophy and his estimation of human reason, see Efreem Bettoni, *Saint Bonaventure*, trans. Angelus Gambatese (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1964), 119–27; Vincenzo Cherubino Bigi, *Studi sul pensiero di S. Bonaventura* (Assisi: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1988), 325–29; Elisa Cuttini, *Ritorno a Dio. Filosofia, teologia, etica della mens nel pensiero di Bonaventura da Bagnoregio* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002), 121–81; and Alfonso Pompei, "Cosmologia: scienza e fede in Bonaventura da Bagnoregio," *Doctor Seraphicus* 47 (2000): 5–42. Perhaps the best study of the relationship between Bonaventure and Aristotle is Jacques Guy Bougerol's "Dossier pour l'étude des rapports entre saint Bonaventure et Aristote," *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 40 (1973): 135–222. Benedict himself acknowledges Bonaventure's suspicion of Aristotle not only in *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971, 1989), 134–62; but also in a lecture given at the College of St. Thomas and St. John Vianney Seminary, "Faith, Philosophy, and Theology," in *Pope John Paul II Lecture Series* (St. Paul, Minnesota: College of St. Thomas, St. John Vianney Seminary, 1985), 11, 13.

⁵ Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 57.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 58. This dimension of revelation is brought out most clearly in Bonaventure's *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, ed. Pp. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 5 (Quaracchi: ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1891), 14, 25, where Bonaventure uses the term "prophetic revelation" to show how Old Testament figures and events represent Christ. The other references Benedict cites (13, 17; 14, 7; 14, 10) do not stand by themselves as easily, but must be placed side by side one another in order to corroborate the understanding of revelation given in 14, 25.

a “spiritual” understanding of Scripture. For Bonaventure, this authentic understanding of Scripture, which is a type of revelation, occurs only in the sixth age of human history after the life and mission of Jesus Christ.⁸ Bonaventure is clear that revelation does not pertain to the letters of Scripture, or the literal sense, but revelation instead consists of God’s communication of the spiritual understanding of Scripture. Using the Gospel story of Jesus turning water into wine, Bonaventure claims that the “Holy Spirit does not give spiritual understanding unless man provide the jar, that is, his capacity, and the water, that is, the understanding of the literal sense.”⁹ When the literal sense is turned into “wine” or the spiritual understanding, the “jar” or human capacity remains, but the literal understanding is turned into the spiritual understanding.¹⁰ The third spiritual signification of “revelation” can refer to “that imageless unveiling of the divine reality which takes place in the mystical ascent.”¹¹ This dimension of revelation emphasizes the importance of love in uniting the individual with God in such a way that the concepts and the activity of the intellect cease to operate and only “the affective power keeps vigil and imposes silence upon all other powers.”¹²

Bonaventure’s threefold understanding of revelation allows him to outline three forms of wisdom that are made possible only by means of revelation: *sapientia multiformis*, *sapientia omniformis*, and *sapientia nulliformis*. *Sapientia multiformis* is the wisdom that Scripture communicates under various figures and signs.¹³ *Sapientia omniformis* is the wisdom that can be found in all things.¹⁴ Wisdom, in its most penetrating reach into the human soul, has no form, hence the designation *sapientia nulliformis*.

⁸ See Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, 16, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19, 8.

¹⁰ Benedict will use similar language when discussing the creation narrative of Genesis. He claims that the Old Testament can be read only in light of Christ, who provides the unity of Scripture. Any interpretation of the creation account, or the legal precepts for that matter, without reference to Christ would be concerned only with the literal sense of Scripture; it is Christ who “frees us from the slavery of the letter.” Benedict, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of the Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1990), 26. On faith as a hermeneutic lens that “opens” the Scriptures, see his essay “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–23.

¹¹ Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 59.

¹² Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, 2, 30.

¹³ See *ibid.*, 2, 12.

¹⁴ On the idea of “natural” revelation, see Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, trans. Alexander Dru (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 7–13.

The soul attains this height of wisdom by grace, turning away from sense perceptions and images and gazing only at God.¹⁵

The fact that revelation is operative in all of these manifestations of wisdom implies that revelation is not consigned to the past, nor identified only with the writing of Scripture, but is an ongoing process that occurs throughout salvation history, eliciting a response of faith both in individuals and in the Church as a whole. The subjective dimension of revelation, that is, what pertains to an individual's penetrating vision of the intelligible world, is bound up with prophecy and contemplation. The objective dimension of revelation, that is, what pertains to the content of revelation, is found in Scripture and the understanding of Scripture as articulated by the Fathers of the Church.

In both the subjective and objective dimensions of revelation, what allows the individual and the Church to respond to divine revelation is the gift of faith. Faith is an attitude or disposition of the will that allows the individual and the Church to understand the content of Scripture, the "spirit" veiled by the "letter." As the individual and the Church witness God's revelation of himself, they articulate in human language what they "see" or perceive. Scripture is one result of this effort to describe the ineffable, but so too is any work in which the understanding of Scripture is communicated. Scripture is the privileged source because it contains the "mysteries" that both reveal and conceal the mystery of Christ,¹⁶ but the non-scriptural reception and communication of the mysteries of the faith is also "revelation," as well.

For Bonaventure what matters is not so much the written text of Scripture, the "letter," but the understanding of it that is received and passed on in the Church. One may read Scripture but still not believe or understand what it says. Likewise, someone may never be able to read Scripture and still understand what it says through the preaching and oral exposition of others. The inseparability of the text of Scripture and the understanding of Scripture explains not only the equation of *sacra scriptura* and *theologia* in the thirteenth century and the designation of scholastic theologians as *doctores sacrae scripturae*,¹⁷ but it also suggests the need for a corporate reception and

¹⁵ This description of wisdom is slightly different from that found in Bonaventure's *Sentences* commentary, where he distinguishes four kinds of wisdom. See his *Commentaria in IV Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, vol. 3, ed. Pp. Collegii S. Bonaventurae (Florence: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1934–49), d. 35, a. 1, q. 1.

¹⁶ See Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, 2, 11–12.

¹⁷ See Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 67; and Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 54–58.

understanding of Scripture and the development of the understanding of Scripture over time.

Because God's revelations to the individual and to the Church throughout history have the same source there is a harmony among them. Since God is the source of the spiritual understanding of Scripture, there should also be a harmony of interpretations between the individual exegete and the Church, as well. This fact does not mean that theologians do not disagree in their understanding of certain passages in Scripture or in their understanding of certain teachings (the record of scholastic disputations and ecclesial condemnations from the thirteenth century confirms that), but it signifies that both the individual and the Christian community receive revelations from the same source and respond to it with the same faith, regardless of its articulation.

The fact that revelation and the response to revelation that is faith both occur in time and space implies that both revelation and faith grow over time. This process is true both for the individual believer and for the Church as a whole. As the individual advances in contemplation, the soul perceives more profoundly the truths that Scripture contains; likewise in the Church, the contemplative part of the Church learns more and more about the revelation contained in Scripture. Scripture contains an infinite number of "seeds" or interpretations that require time to unfold them.¹⁸ Only constant contemplation on the truths of the faith can make these seeds bear fruit.

But how does this growth of revelation take place throughout history? As indicated above, God reveals himself to the prophets and apostles who write most of the books of Scripture.¹⁹ The spiritual meaning is revealed progressively by the Fathers of the Church, who interpret Scripture through the lens of faith, and whose writings, because of their close relationship to the truths of the faith, are not completely separate from Scripture. Characterizing Bonaventure's view of the relationship between Scripture and patristic exegesis, Benedict claims that the Fathers are "bearers of a new spiritual 'revelation,' without which the Scriptures simply would not be effective as revelation."²⁰

Revelation does not end with the age of the Fathers, however. In fact, for Bonaventure, it increases and intensifies over time, so that his own age shares in this process, as well. Bonaventure notes that the sixth age of the Old Testament, from Hezekiah to Zerubbabel, was one of prophecy, and it parallels the sixth age of the New Testament, which began with the

¹⁸ See Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, 13, 2.

¹⁹ On the canonical status of biblical books not written by the prophets and apostles, see Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, 78–79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

pontificate of Adrian I and continued up to Bonaventure's own day.²¹ The fact that Bonaventure was living in the time of prophecy before the seventh and final age is significant for his understanding of the process of revelation. The gift of prophecy allows for the "contemplative Church"²² to have a greater understanding of Scripture than existed in earlier stages of salvation history.

According to Bonaventure, however, the Church has not only a contemplative dimension, but an "active" dimension and a "mixed" dimension (comprising activity and contemplation), as well. Although the distinction between action and contemplation had long been used by Christian writers to describe the various modes of Christian life, Bonaventure recasts this distinction in light of historical developments in the thirteenth century (and also with a desire to have any earthly *ordo* align with the ninefold angelic hierarchy of Pseudo-Dionysius and the threefold "hierarchy" of the Trinity). The active part of the Church is made of three groups of laypeople (people, masters, and leaders), and the "mixed" part of the Church consists of clerics, whose way of life involves contemplation but service in the world, as well.²³ The contemplative part of the Church has three groups. The first consists of those who pray, namely monks. The second group consists of those who "speculate" or study Scripture: the Dominicans and the Franciscans.²⁴ The final group consists of those whose contemplation has led to rapture or ecstasy, and here Bonaventure lists only Francis.

The fact that the two most recognized mendicant orders comprise the penultimate stage of the contemplative dimension of the Church precisely because of their study of Scripture is significant. Francis, the one who occupies the highest plane of contemplation, is the one whom God chose to rebuild the Church of that time. Francis's prophetic role was revealed to him, and it involved a life of following the Gospel quite literally. In his *Legenda maior*, Bonaventure ensures that his master is both apostolic, in the

²¹ See Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, 16, 29.

²² "Ecclesia contemplative": Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, 13, 7. See also *ibid.*, 16, 29.

²³ The clerics also are divided into three groups: ministers, priests, and pontiffs. The "ministers" consist of porters, readers, exorcists, acolytes, subdeacons, and deacons; the "priests" consist of both priests and bishops; the "pontiffs" category includes Christ, Peter, the pope, and the patriarchs of the four other patriarchates. Further discussion of Bonaventure's understanding of the structure of the Church would take us too far astray from Bonaventure's theology of revelation.

²⁴ Even here Bonaventure cannot resist placing the Franciscans above the Dominicans, because while the Dominicans emphasize study, the Franciscans emphasize love. See Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaëmeron*, 22, 21.

sense of living an apostolic life and being devoted to the apostles (especially St. Peter), and prophetic.²⁵ Both dimensions involve following the truths of the Gospel, and preaching those truths. In order to preach the Gospel, his followers would have to do more than live a life of poverty; they would have to study Scripture and imitate what they studied. Only then would Franciscan preaching be effective. Francis's literal imitation of the Gospel, which was the fruit of his mystical experiences, was both the historical and the theological foundation for the Franciscans' study of Scripture. Following Francis meant looking back to Christ, the apostles, and the Church Fathers, and toward the eschatological elements of the Gospel, which were in the process of unfolding.

Although Bonaventure situates his own time just before the seventh age of the New Testament, and so gives his own time an apocalyptic coloring, he was convinced that the infinite seeds of Scripture were not close to sprouting and blooming. The full revelation was in the process of unfolding and would be consummated in the seventh age, but the mendicants (and the Franciscans in particular) played an important role in preparing for the full revelation that God would bring about. For Bonaventure, the mendicant orders not only followed the Gospel more literally than the monks did, but their following of the Gospel coincided with a renewed interest in Scripture. Indeed the scientific examination of Scripture, emphasizing the literal sense, was rooted in St. Francis's decision to follow the Beatitudes literally. For Bonaventure, Francis was an eschatological figure, whose self-giving response to God's Revelation in the form of poverty pointed the way to a new manner, not only of living the Gospel, but also of interpreting Scripture, as well. The scriptural studies of the Franciscans and Dominicans during the first half of the thirteenth century led to renewed interest in the transmission of scriptural texts, the creation of study tools, such as concordances and lists of variant readings of the Vulgate text, changes in the method of dividing the text, and drawing from contemporary theologians and spiritual writers, and not only the Fathers or "doctors" of the Church.

Bonaventure's theory of revelation, then, gives a priority to God revealing himself to human beings throughout history. Knowledge of God is communicated to people as individuals, such as Abraham, but also to people as whole. "Scripture" is one means of communicating God's revelation, but the actual act of revelation is in some sense prior to writing the text of Scripture or to people's reading Scripture or hearing its exposition. This priority is manifested when faith accompanies the read-

²⁵ See Bonaventure, *Legenda Sancti Francisci*, ed. Pp. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 8 (Quaracchi: ex Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1898), ch. 3.

ing of Scripture, since without it no knowledge of God may be received. The collective reading of Scripture in the Church, that is, the place where Scripture is read and heard, builds up the spiritual understanding of Scripture over time in such a way that the Church as a whole gains deeper insights into God and his plan of salvation. Bonaventure's appreciation for the transmission of revelation throughout history and the increasing deepening or penetration of revelation over time anticipated in some ways modern approaches to fundamental theology.

Benedict's Discovery of Bonaventurian Resonances in Vatican II

As theologians in the middle of the twentieth century gained a greater appreciation for the historical context of revelation and the response to that revelation, they increasingly focused on God's plan of salvation in history and the human potential to receive and understand revelation. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, was written with some of these interests in mind; and Benedict, then a professor of fundamental theology at the University of Bonn, contributed to the theological discussion that shaped the schemata of what eventually would become *Dei Verbum*. Benedict's previous study of Bonaventure, completed in 1957, had allowed him to reflect on the nature of revelation; and it proved valuable in the ongoing discussions of the schemata, which proved to be highly controversial.²⁶

In the final text of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, Benedict found profound similarities between high scholastic models of revelation and what the council fathers taught in *Dei Verbum*. One similarity was the understanding of revelation as a process, and another was its eliciting faith in individuals and in the receiving community.²⁷ It is precisely this dynamic understanding of revelation and faith that attracted Benedict to Bonaventure's model of revelation. Benedict was intrigued by it, because, in contrast to certain neo-scholastic models, the scholasticism of the thirteenth century understood revelation to be an act of God. The neo-scholastic models that dissatisfied Benedict understood revelation to be

²⁶ See Benedict's reflections on these discussions in Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 124–30.

²⁷ Shortly after the council, René Latourelle, who saw *Dei Verbum* as a possible "charter of fundamental theology," described the task of fundamental theology to be understanding the Word of God "in its mysterious being, in its historical unraveling, in the signs of this unraveling, in the objective forms by which it expresses itself and perdures through the centuries (tradition and Scripture), and in its authentic interpreter (the magisterium)." "Dismemberment or Renewal of Fundamental Theology?" trans. Anthony M. Buono, in *The Development of Fundamental Theology*, ed. Johannes B. Metz (New York-Paramus, NJ: Paulist Press, 1969), 31.

what resulted from that action, namely Scripture and Tradition. According to Bonaventure, Scripture could not exhaust God's revelatory self-communication; God's revelation always transcends what gives witness to it. This theological approach to the question of revelation found favor with those modern theologians, like Benedict, who thought it important to consider how the receiving subject or subjects of revelation shared in the act of revelation. Benedict summarizes the findings of his research in his *Milestones*:

The word ["revelation"] refers to the act in which God shows himself, not to the objectified result of this act. And because this is so, the receiving subject is always also a part of the concept of "revelation." Where there is no one to perceive "revelation," no re-*vel*-ation has occurred, because no *veil* has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it. These insights, gained through my reading of Bonaventure, were later on very important for me at the time of the conciliar discussion on revelation. Because, if Bonaventure is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but is not simply identical with it. This in turn means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down. And this again means that there can be no such thing as pure *sola scriptura* ("by Scripture alone"), because an essential element of Scripture is the Church as understanding subject, and with this the fundamental sense of tradition is already given.²⁸

This understanding of revelation that Benedict found in Bonaventure implies that revelation is not only historical, it is also intrinsically dialogical. It begins with God who reveals himself, but he reveals himself to a "receiving subject," whose being is conditioned by time and space.

Benedict describes this process further in his commentary *Dei Verbum*, where he describes the council's articulation of revelation in terms very similar to what he discovered in the Seraphic Doctor (although he never mentions him). Benedict, for example, emphasizes the differences in the articulation of revelation between Vatican I and Vatican II, and several emerge:

Whereas Vatican I starts from the natural knowledge of God and considers "supernatural" revelation only in close connection with this idea, in order to proceed immediately to the question of its transmission in scripture and tradition, here the question of natural knowledge of God is put at the end and God's revealing activity described within a comprehensive survey of salvation history. . . . Here, instead of the

²⁸ Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 108–9.

abstract values “sapientia et bonitas” we first have reference to God himself “in his wisdom and goodness,” thus giving a far greater emphasis to the personal and theocentric starting point when compared with Vatican I: it is God himself, the person of God, from whom revelation proceeds and to whom it returns, and thus revelation necessarily reaches—also with the person who receives it—into the personal center of man, it touches him in the depth of his being, not only in his individual faculties, in his will and understanding.²⁹

What Benedict here calls the “personal and theocentric starting point” is precisely what he discovered in Bonaventure.³⁰ God communicates himself in a unique way at certain moments in salvation history.

Criticizing again what he calls “neo-scholastic intellectualism” that understood revelation to be “a store of mysterious supernatural teachings,” Benedict believed that *Dei Verbum* tried to show how revelation was a “totality, in which word and event make up one whole, a true dialogue which touches man in his totality, not only challenging his reason, but, as dialogue, addressing him as a partner, indeed, giving him his true nature for the first time.”³¹ Benedict noted that this dialogical dimension of revelation, the fact that God’s act of revealing necessarily involves individual recipients, including the Church in some sense, has profound implications. Most obviously, it entails that this action of revelation initiated by God invites or elicits a fully human response, a response that not only originates within time and space, but also is directed toward the eternal and thus what is in humanity’s future. This human response occurs only because of the human openness toward the divine and the receptivity latent in that openness, and the response of faith is possible only because one has heard God.

Indeed Benedict believed that the emphasis on listening in *Dei Verbum* was one of its strengths over earlier drafts of the document that were in danger of “ecclesiological positivism.”³² If the earlier schema had prevailed (in particular text C),

²⁹ Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation: Origin and Background,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimmler, trans. William Glen-Doepel, et al. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 170.

³⁰ See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* I, c. 6; and *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 6.

³¹ Ratzinger, “Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation,” 172. Although Benedict here describes the receptive subject of revelation primarily in anthropological terms, in his commentary on ch. 2 of *Dei Verbum* the Church plays a more significant role as the partner in God’s revelatory act. See *ibid.*, 181–98. Benedict also notes in passing the influence of neo-scholastic theological emphases on earlier versions of the text: see 157–66.

³² See *ibid.*, 162.

The Council would otherwise have risked falling victim to a kind of ecclesio-monism in its texts, whereas the Constitution on Revelation now stressed the importance of listening, thus moving beyond everything that was said at the Council in order to take up an attitude of listening, an attitude in which the Church transcends itself, for it is not there for its own sake, but only to lead him to whom all honor is due, God the Lord.³³

Revelation thus conceived includes both God's self-communication and the human response simultaneously. This understanding is exactly what Benedict found in Bonaventure's theology of revelation. Just as revelation is not "a store of mysterious supernatural teachings,"³⁴ so too "faith is not a system of knowledge, but trust."³⁵ This trust is an existential orientation, a direction of life that one manifests concretely within history, but that always is open toward the future, which is "where" the Church and each believer await the fulfillment of God's promise.³⁶

Bonaventurian Themes in Benedict's Writings After the Council

After the council, Benedict developed the understanding of revelation and faith that he found in *Dei Verbum* and that he described in his commentary on it. He continued the idea that revelation is an ongoing process initiated by God, but he recast that teaching into more existential terms. Although Benedict returns to this theme in numerous places, making an exhaustive study here impossible, it will suffice to point out a few places where Benedict develops his theology of revelation.

In Benedict's recent work, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, he echoes Bonaventure's understanding of revelation as individual acts of God's self-communication, initiated throughout history, and translates it into existential terms. In contrasting what he calls "mysticism" with monotheistic religion, Benedict argues that mysticism is a religious system in which the ultimate reality is a spiritual experience that the individual achieves through a purifying ascent into a passive and impersonal God. Monotheism, as Benedict understands it, stands in near opposition to this view of religion and necessarily requires God's initiative. Monotheism views God as the primary agent in the historical relationship and sees

³³ Ibid., 162.

³⁴ Ibid., 172.

³⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971), 24.

³⁶ For a summary of the early conciliar debate on revelation, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, trans. Henry Traub and Gerard C. Thormann (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), 20–26.

union as occurring between a personal God and individuals. Revelation occurs when “something not ours, not to be found in what we have, comes to me and takes me out of myself, above myself, creates something new.”³⁷ It is a “call from God,” which is the ultimate reality in human existence.³⁸

This call, initiated by God, goes out to all people, people embedded in historical and cultural contexts; and it requires a response. The positive response, the response that allows each human to be an “actor in divine history,”³⁹ is faith. Even in his understanding of faith, however, Benedict begins with an existential approach. In his early *Introduction to Christianity*, he describes the most basic characteristic of faith as an openness toward what is not visible, that is, an acknowledgment that what we experience through sense perceptions may not be all there is to reality. He explains that “belief signifies the decision that at the very core of human existence there is a point that cannot be nourished and supported on the visible and tangible, that encounters and comes into contact with what cannot be seen and finds that it is a necessity for its own existence.”⁴⁰ This attitude is a “conversion” in some sense because humanity possesses a natural inclination toward what is sensible. The acknowledgment of what is not sensible, the acknowledgment of something that undergirds and supports sensible reality, is an authentic step toward the truth of reality in its fullness.

From this basic attitude of openness toward Another to the God of Jesus Christ seems to be quite a leap. How is the chasm bridged? Benedict finds in the enigmatic figure of Abraham a clue to expanding the understanding of what faith means. What is important for Benedict is not so much that Abraham was unaware of Jesus Christ or that he may have had a polytheistic religion. The first important element of Abraham’s faith is that the God of all, the Creator, was a family God, even a personal God. This fact implies that the Creator was not only outside the created order, but somehow inside it, as well. The transcendent Creator was a God of history and in history, a God who entered into relationships, covenants with humanity. The second important fact about Abraham’s faith was that this God called to Abraham, and Abraham responded to that call by leaving his homeland and going into unknown lands and an uncertain future. This step from the known into the unknown, this leap of faith in response

³⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 51.

to God's call (however that call was perceived), represents a remarkable commitment:

[Abraham] gave up the present for the sake of what was to come. He let go of what was safe, comprehensible, calculable, for the sake of what was unknown. And he did this in response to a single word from God. He had met God and placed all his future in God's hands; he dared to accept a new future that began in darkness. The word he heard was more real to him than all the calculable things he could hold in his hand. He trusted that which he could not yet see, and thus became capable of new life, of breaking out of rigidity. The center of gravity of reality, indeed the concept of reality itself, changed. The future took precedence over the present, the word heard over comprehensible things. God had become more important to him than himself and than the things he could understand.

This response to God's call marks Abraham's freedom:

Attachment to the accustomed world came to an end, and man's true destination appeared—not his immediate environment, but the whole world, the whole of creation that knows no frontiers, but allows itself to be explored until the ultimate foundation of everything has been discovered. . . . Abraham is on the way. He no longer belongs to any fixed place, and is therefore a stranger and a guest wherever he goes.⁴¹

Abraham's faith is not merely openness but an attitude of trust in a personal God. The trust is elicited because of God's promise to Abraham, a promise whose fulfillment lay in the distant future. The trust also implies a renunciation, a conversion from what is known to what is unknown.

Although this faith is clearly different from a mere openness to Another, insofar as trust in the promise of a personal God becomes operative, how does it relate to the faith of Christianity? Abraham's belief in God's promise of future posterity and a future homeland and the Christian faith in the God of the resurrected Jesus seem very different. Christianity seems to care very little about blood ties and a hope for a future homeland on earth. Nevertheless, for Benedict, the person of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. In Christ, "the promise of a future, of the country of the future, has acquired a full and clearly defined form. Faith in the risen Christ is nothing other than the faith of Abraham—the promise of a future and of a country."⁴²

⁴¹ Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, 30–31.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39–40.

The difference between belief in God before and after the event of Christ is the person of Christ himself. Before Christ, those who had faith (Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham, the people of Israel) trusted God with their future. Abraham's faith is so strong that he could be prepared to sacrifice Isaac, his son, the embodiment of Abraham's future, because of his trust in the Lord.⁴³ Those who had faith in God believed that they would have a place of rest and a time of peace in the future. With the advent of Christ, the "place" and "time" of the future are made present. Christ himself is the future of humanity because "Faith in the God of Jesus Christ means faith in the God who still opens up, really and truly, a future behind the wall of death."⁴⁴ The resurrection of the crucified Christ shows the similarity between Abraham and Christ, namely that both entrusted their entire being to God; the difference between Abraham and Christ is that the promise to Abraham has been fulfilled in the Word-made-flesh, in whom the future has been made eternally present. The exodus or "cultural break,"⁴⁵ that is, the journey in which Abraham and the people of Israel left behind what was familiar for something new, is, in Christianity, "now interiorized as the readiness to allow oneself to be changed."⁴⁶ The promise of a glorious future, which Abraham believed, is revealed fully in the resurrected Christ. The life represented by the Resurrection is eternal and one of communion with God. It redeems humanity from what is so familiar—namely sin, suffering, and death—and allows the believer to share in that eternal life. It implies the eradication of sin and death in general and the forgiveness of personal sins and their consequences as well.

Benedict's more existential description of faith allows him to address contemporary concerns better than if he had retained more traditional language. He believes that it is important that Christian faith be a trust directed toward "that which has not been made by oneself and never could be made and which precisely in this way supports and makes possible all our making."⁴⁷ It means that this trust lies outside the realm of practical or scientific knowledge. Drawing from Heidegger's distinction between "calculating" and "reflective" thought, Benedict argues that trust belongs to the realm of reflective thought, the dimension of humanity that pertains to the "realm of basic decisions that man cannot avoid making."⁴⁸

⁴³ See Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 94.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, 42.

⁴⁵ Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 87.

⁴⁶ Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*, 46.

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 70.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

In responding to the fundamental questions that pertain to the very meaning and existence of each human person, humanity can find the meaning of existence in what it makes or in what it receives from beyond itself. If humanity looks for the meaning of existence in what it makes, it must put its trust in the future that it is preparing and will accomplish. For Benedict, the archetypal model of this form of belief is Marxism.⁴⁹ Since it does not acknowledge the reception of human existence and the meaning bestowed on it apart from itself, it is a monological belief system, or perhaps better, a solipsistic belief system. True dialogue can exist for humanity only when it responds to what it hears from outside itself.

Although Benedict cites Marxism as a particularly acute danger because of the “impression it evokes of harmony with practical knowledge,”⁵⁰ he also asserts that the danger of calculating thought eclipsing reflective thought is present in every age. Benedict cites as an example Bonaventure’s response to the increasing interest in the natural world that developed in the thirteenth century. The problem according to Bonaventure was not so much the growing autonomy of philosophy or natural science. What Bonaventure encountered was a certain type of amnesia. According to Benedict, “Bonaventure felt obliged to reproach his colleagues of the philosophical faculty at Paris with having learned how to measure the world but having forgotten how to measure themselves.”⁵¹

How should humanity “measure” itself? A clue to discovering how to measure oneself is the restlessness within each person. Augustine, in the famous opening passage of *The Confessions*, prayed, “You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.”⁵² The restlessness that one feels existentially invites the kind of reflective thought to which Bonaventure exhorted his colleagues at the University of Paris. Ultimately that restlessness is a deeper invitation, not only to reflective thought, but to a radical orientation and trust in the Creator. This reflective thought can liberate humanity and allow it to realize its yearning for authentic freedom, which is conceived not as the ability to act in autonomous fashion, but rather as the acceptance of love.⁵³

Ultimately it is faith or trust in God that will allow humanity to find the true measure of itself. Benedict notes the significance of faith in his

⁴⁹ See Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 72. See also his comments regarding Marxism in Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 26, 31.

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵² Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 1997), I, 1, 1.

⁵³ See Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One*, 33–34; and *idem*, *Salt of the Earth*, 282–83.

commentary on part of *Gaudium et Spes*: “Faith does not diminish man but leads him in the direction which alone the endless restlessness which impels him can find satisfaction. Man’s measure is infinity, everything else is too little for him. Consequently only God can be man’s measure.”⁵⁴ This capacity for God is a gift, something received and not something manufactured by humanity. Faith is the human response to that gift and “to the meaning” that supports humanity and the world.⁵⁵ In “more traditional language,” Benedict describes faith as “a response to the word, the *logos*, that upholds and maintains all things.”⁵⁶ It is clear, however, that there is nothing impersonal about this response to “the word.” This faith is a trust in the Word-made-flesh, a person, who makes existence intelligible to humanity:

Christian faith lives on the discovery that not only is there such a thing as objective meaning but that this meaning knows me and loves me, that I can entrust myself to it like the child who knows that everything he may be wondering about is safe in the “you” of his mother. Thus in the last analysis believing, trusting, and loving are one, and all the theses around which belief revolves are only concrete expressions of the all-embracing about-turn, of the assertion “I believe in you”—of the discovery of God in the countenance of the man Jesus of Nazareth.⁵⁷

Faith, then, as an attitude of trust, begins with openness to what is not perceived by the senses, and it moves toward a realization that this imperceivable reality beyond itself communicates meaning to each individual. What gives meaning to human beings, precisely, is love, a love that is manifested in action. Here is where the revelation of God in Jesus Christ becomes the starting point of the people’s realization of just how much this “imperceivable reality,” namely God, loves them.

Although Benedict’s less traditional language, especially in his later writings, may make his theology of revelation seem rather distant from that of Bonaventure, Benedict has retained most of the essential themes of Bonaventure’s thought. First, Benedict gives priority to God’s initiative in revealing himself to humanity. Second, this revelation transcends the text of Scripture in such a way that faith must precede its reading for it

⁵⁴ See his commentary on *Gaudium et Spes* “The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. W.J. O’Hara (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 159. The sentiment articulated there is expressed in the context of human freedom in idem, *Behold the Pierced One*, 34.

⁵⁵ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 73.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 80.

to be transformative.⁵⁸ Third, faith, that is, humanity's response to God, necessarily possesses a corporate dimension. Revelation is given to individuals, who, because of their faith, form a community that continually communicates God's revelation. An ongoing dialectic of reception and communication continues throughout history so that "the individual authors [of the Bible] are inspired, and thus the Church is active in speaking through them, and God is speaking through the Church."⁵⁹ Throughout history then, revelation continues and even grows, both in the individual and in the Church.⁶⁰ Fourth, Benedict's theology of revelation maintains a strong historical and even eschatological orientation, which involves not only an emphasis on God's plan of salvation within history, but also on the very theological significance of history and its relationship with the future. These elements of fundamental theology, all central to Benedict's thought, have close parallels with the theology of the Seraphic Doctor. Although in Benedict's later writings Bonaventure is cited less frequently than he was in the earlier part of his career, and although Benedict clearly developed what he had learned from Bonaventure, Bonaventure's theology of revelation remains a foundational source of Benedict's own theology and his view of God's revelation to humanity within history. N V

⁵⁸ See Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 152–59.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 155. Heinrich Schlier, who wrote about revelation at the time of the Second Vatican Council, expresses it this way: "the communication of God by Jesus Christ to the world merges into communication of Him by the tradition of those who experienced it. God's self-disclosure to the world is disclosed precisely as such in history, in the explanatory speech of those who have opened themselves to it." *The Relevance of the New Testament*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 49. (The original edition, *Besinnung auf das Neue Testament*, was published in 1964.)

⁶⁰ See Ratzinger, *God and the World*, 154.